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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000944

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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: PROMINENT GEOGRAPHER REVIEWS
LEBANESE-SYRIAN BORDER AND SHEBAA FARMS CLAIMS

REF: A. 05 BEIRUT 1604

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 898

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Prominent Lebanese geographer and member of the prime minister's commission on Shebaa Farms Issam Khalifeh told econoff on March 22 that there are 36 points of contention along the Lebanese-Syrian border. These disputes include areas still occupied by Syrian military or border guard forces, Syrian use of Lebanese water, and Syrian denial of Lebanese accessing their land. One of the points of contention was the Shebaa Farms, which Khalifeh considered a part of Lebanon. He said that Lebanese had lived there, paid taxes to Lebanese authorities, and were expelled by the Israeli military after the 1967 war. The boundaries of the Shebaa Farms were unclear, with Khalifeh referring to several contradictory maps that transcend space and time. In Khalifeh's expert opinion, Lebanese claims represent an amalgam of the maps as well as "practical concerns." For example, according to Khalifeh, Ghajar and its Syrian residents as well as a corridor connecting it to Baniyas fall outside of Lebanon. The Shebaa Farms, the abandoned village of Nkahle, and Mount Hermon are Lebanese land, according to Khalifeh. End summary.

LEBANESE-SYRIAN BORDER
RIDDLES WITH DISPUTES

[1](#)2. (SBU) On March 22, econoff and FSN political specialist met with Dr. Issam Khalifeh, the preeminent Lebanese geographer, to discuss his expert opinion on Lebanon's border with Syria. Khalifeh is a professor at Lebanese University, a member of the prime minister's commission on the Shebaa Farms, and an author of several books on Lebanon's border. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri used his maps of the Shebaa Farms at the national dialogue.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Working from north to south, Khalifeh pointed out 36 points of dispute along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Some of the key points of contention are:

-- The Bouchayya Plain near the Lebanese village of Nasriyeh (MGRS//37SBU5540) is occupied by Syrian forces.

-- A dam in Syrian territory restricts the flow of a stream into the Lebanese border village of Qasr (MGRS//37SBU6418).

-- The villagers of Qaa (MGRS//37SBU6703) are prevented from tending their farms about 4 km east of the village by Syrian border guards operating on Lebanese territory. The Syrians have also reportedly dug 15 Artesian wells in Lebanese territory, using limited water resources.

-- Land along the borders near Baayoune (MGRS//37Sbt7388) and Haourte is not demarcated. Syrian military and civilian personnel are occupying land and wells that are owned by the nearby Lebanese villagers who hold Lebanese land deeds.

-- To the east of the Lebanese village of Khirbet Daoud (MGRS//37SBT7388), Syrian military and border guards occupy millions of square meters of farmland. Biqa Valley municipalities have filed formal complaints.

-- To the east of the Lebanese village of Qousayya (MGRS//37SBT2542), the PFLP-GC, with Syrian assistance, occupies land that straddles the Lebanese-Syrian border (see ref A for more details).

-- At the border crossing at Al-Masnaa (MGRS//36SYC7132), the Syrian border guards placed their checkpoint 2.5 kilometers into Lebanon during the occupation. The Syrians still occupy that checkpoint, effectively putting a strip of land 2.5 kilometers wide under Syrian control.

-- To the east of the Lebanese village Deir al-Aachir (MGRS//37SBT2217), the Syrian military still occupied a military camp just inside Lebanon.

14. (SBU) Khalifeh added that most of the rest of the disputed points were cases where the Lebanese-Syrian border appeared to run through Lebanese villages. He claimed that

BEIRUT 00000944 002 OF 003

Syria had informally agreed that the border would always run outside of the borders of villages to prevent problems of Lebanese being unable to access their land.

THE HISTORY OF THE SHEBAA FARMS

15. (SBU) Khalifeh included the Shebaa Farms area as one of his points of contention along the Lebanese-Syrian border. It was his opinion that the Shebaa Farms were Lebanese based on its alleged inclusion into the Hasbaya caza under the French Mandate and the fact that Shebaa Farms residents had paid their taxes to the local Lebanese authorities in Marjayoun. Shebaa Farms residents also arbitrated disputes through Lebanese police. Khalifeh showed purported French colonial maps that showed the Shebaa Farms in Lebanon. He acknowledged, however, that Syrian atlases show Shebaa Farms as a part of Syria.

16. (SBU) According to Khalifeh, the Shebaa Farms were inhabited until 1982. Most of the Shebaa Farms residents were driven off their land immediately following the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights (including the Shebaa Farms) during 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Khalifeh said that Israeli forces on June 10, 11, and 15, 1967 progressively destroyed houses in the Shebaa Farms and in the village of Nkhale (approximately 3316N, 3538E). The resulting refugees, considering themselves Lebanese, moved to the Lebanese village of Shebaa where many of their relatives lived. The final depopulation of the area was completed in 1982 when Israeli forces destroyed homes in the Bastra Farms area and sent the refugees into Lebanon, apparently in retaliation for the capture of an Israeli soldier in the Lebanese village of Shebaa. Since 1982, the villagers of Shebaa were no longer allowed to harvest their lands in the Shebaa Farms, according to Khalifeh.

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SHEBAA FARMS

¶17. (SBU) Khalifeh showed econoff several maps depicting the Shebaa Farms area. He acknowledged that Lebanese Ministry of Defense and tourist maps show Lebanon's border encompassing the Israeli-controlled half of the village of Ghajar (aka the "forged map"). This borderline, which follows the Wadi al-Assal to the 1948 border with Israel, was drawn by the French in 1925, according to Khalifeh. However, Khalifeh preferred to use a 1937 map by the French cartographer Bart that drew the western border of Shebaa Farms differently. Bart's map drew the western border of Shebaa Farms to the east of Ghajar, continuing south to include the now abandoned village of Nkahle, and then turning eastward to the Wadi al-Assal. The boundary then followed the Wadi al-Assal straight up to the present-day Blue Line. Bart's borders left a thin corridor, including a farm called Mughir Shebaa (approximately 3317N, 3540E), of Syrian land linking Ghajar to Baniyas (approximately 3315N, 3542E) and the rest of the Golan Heights.

¶18. (C) This, however, was not the end of the story. Khalifeh said that although his historical evidence pointed to a specific borderline, he admitted that some "practical" adjustments need be made. First, even though official Lebanese maps show Ghajar in Lebanon, he said that Lebanon would not claim the village. Like in Bart's map, the Shebaa Farms should exclude Ghajar and a thin corridor connecting it to the rest of the Golan Heights. Ghajar's residents consider themselves to be Syrian, he explained. (Note: Other interlocutors, such as Amal MP Ali Bazzi, MFA North Americas Desk Officer Ghady el-Khoury, and former UNIFIL spokesman Timur Goksel, have previously told us that Lebanon does not claim Ghajar as a part of Lebanon. End note.)

¶19. (SBU) Regarding the eastern boundary of Shebaa Farms, Khalifeh made the startling claim that Mount Hermon (aka Jabal al-Sheikh) is a part of Lebanon. Being the first time he heard this claim, econoff asked if Khalifeh meant the area where the Israeli listening post and ski lift are located. Khalifeh replied yes, where the spy station is. "The Lebanese built the ski lift," he added. Khalifeh then produced a 2002 map by Dr. Mouin Haddad that he believed most authoritatively represented Lebanese land claims. This map excluded Ghajar, bypassed Nkahle (which Khalifeh said was a mistake and corrected with his pen), and followed the Wadi

BEIRUT 00000944 003 OF 003

al-Assal before curving east to run parallel with the Blue Line. The map included Mount Hermon in "the borders of Lebanese land occupied by Israeli since 1967." Khalifeh said that Lebanon had a right to Mount Hermon politically, for its water promised in the Johnston Agreement, and for its religious significance.

SIDE NOTE: THE
"FINGER" OF LEBANON

¶10. (SBU) Econoff inquired about the prominent "finger" shaped protrusion in the Lebanese-Syrian border at Tfail (MGRS//37SBT5648). Khalifeh said that the French authorities added the area to Lebanon in 1925 because it is a predominantly Shia area. Janta and Yahfoula were also carved from Syria and added to Lebanon. According to Khalifeh, these areas are not in dispute today.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Khalifeh is an academic and represented himself as such. He does not necessarily speak for the GOL but he is clearly listened to as a member of the prime minister's commission and is generally regarded as the foremost expert on Lebanon's borders. Khalifeh, a Maronite, claimed to favor disarming Hizballah. He said that although Berri used some

of his maps, he did not work for Berri.

¶12. (C) This was the first time any Lebanese has told us that Mount Hermon is Lebanese territory. We hope that this is not a new trend. If picked up by Hizballah, this previously unknown claim could further prolong the conflict. Khalifeh's claim to Mount Hermon is more likely a part of Lebanese confusion over what is and is not Lebanese territory. In a March 21 meeting with the Ambassador and econoff (ref B), Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said he would give a pen to the Syrians and let them draw the borders (within reason), suggesting that he too did not have a clear idea what Lebanon claimed. This voodoo geography may keep the issue muddled for some time to come. But, clearly, Lebanese claims to Mount Hermon will be a showstopper to any potential deal. Israeli objections aside, we wonder whether Syria would be so ready to concede such strategic and water-rich territory that the international community considers as Syrian. End comment.

FELTMAN